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ABSTRACT

This examination of the problems and opportunities of system organization from the viewpoint of public libraries provides a perspective on the growth of library networks, their administration, and the pressures that opposed their development in the 1970's. It identifies the requirements for their further development, and looks at the need for new information systems and more effective marketing for the 1980's. Cooperative systems visited in the process of gathering interviews with librarians across the country are described. The report concludes with the observation that cooperative systems are libraries' best means of competing in a society dominated by large organizations because they can provide the mechanism for raising the funds necessary for adequate services. It recommends that a standard for data in information systems be developed, along with packaged software that would allow libraries to make problem-oriented systems more widely available at a lower cost. (FM)

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COOPERATIVE SYSTEMS AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES ENTERING THE 1980's

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COOPERATIVE SYSTEMS AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES
ENTERING THE 1980's

Part I

This paper looks at the problems and opportunities of system organization from the view of public libraries. It provides a perspective on the growth of multi-library systems, their governance, and the pressures that opposed their development in the 1970's. It also identifies the requirements for their further development in the next decade. Finally, it looks at the need for new information systems and more effective marketing in the 1980's. It is based on a number of interviews with librarians across the country and on experience in public libraries. Part II describes those cooperative systems visited.

Like all of us, public libraries find themselves in a new day. Public institutions with a genteel 19th century tradition of providing families and individuals with self-help, classics, and recreational reading find themselves in a society in which serving the traditional user is not sufficient; they must extend their services to many non-users including corporations and government agencies. In a society whose tempo and organization are shaped by technology and large organizations, and in which advertising budgets determine product success rather than value, public libraries must compete for a shrinking public dollar. Libraries also must face the fact that the growth of information has made inadequate the holdings of any single collection. In addition to this, the rate of inflation for library materials has been increasing at nearly twice the rate of general inflation. The concept of the cooperative system implemented during the 1970's is the library's most

promising institutional response to these challenges.

An important means of implementing the cooperative concept is computer technology that provides for the storage and retrieval of bibliographical data by a network of libraries at reasonable expense. In the next decade, librarians must use advanced technology and larger organizational structures--the processes that have reconstructed our society over a half century--to make the public library a more vital agency, increasing its funding and effectiveness.

The late 1960's saw the development and funding of a number of systems entering public libraries. In the 1970's some of these public library systems expanded to serve public, academic, special and school libraries. The basic elements for these new multi-type systems were: 1) a consensus of library administrators that their libraries would benefit from cooperation, 2) a legal framework permitting the boards of various kinds of libraries to join together, 3) a governance framework, which is often composed of a council of institutional representatives, and a separate management group, 4) a program that provides benefits for the different types of libraries, and 5) provision for funding.

Two of the more advanced multi-type systems occur in New York and California. New York has created a multi-type system that links resources of academic, public, and special libraries. In 1978 funding was provided to add school libraries in a pilot program. CLASS in California provides a state framework for such a system but lacks the level of funding of the New York system. Maryland has approached the problem differently requiring by law that public university libraries be open to the public. Illinois developed an early public system of

libraries used as a model by other states. As an example of the Illinois linkage, the Suburban Library System in Chicago has a well-developed program of reciprocal borrowings between many of its academic, special, and public libraries. It is currently considering a method of extending this cooperation to school libraries. The Illinois systems have a governance problem in that their present law allows only public library representatives as voting board members of the public cooperative systems.

Where multi-type systems do not already exist, there is in many cities across the country serious dialogue between academic and public libraries leading often to the development of consortia. One of the first problems these new consortia face is establishing reciprocal borrowing between their members. The greatest barrier to this cooperation is fear by academic librarians that their resources will be seriously drained through use by the public. This fear has proved to be unfounded in states and localities where borrowing has been developed between different kinds of libraries. A method used by some consortia to break through this barrier is to extend the borrowing privileges for a pilot period allowing them to analyze use. This was done in Illinois' Suburban Library System and led in some months to a net flow of materials from public to academic libraries, the opposite of what was expected.

Librarians have more cautiously approached adding school libraries to their cooperative systems. The large number of schools, their small collections and staff make their integration into library systems more difficult. In spite of this, libraries are establishing links with school libraries at two levels. Statewide library systems most effectively tie in with regional organizations of school systems. New York

has recently voted funds to develop such links. On the local level, many public and community college libraries are establishing direct connections with individual school libraries. For example, Houston Public Library makes available copies of its microfiche catalog to high schools in the area and supplies books requested.

An important contribution to libraries already made by the multi-library systems is the financing of automation by supporting a number of computer networks usually with LSCA funds. The computer networks that were developed in the 1970's can be divided into three categories. The first category includes bibliographic utilities such as OCLC, Washington Library Network, and BALLOTS that offer potentially national cataloging services with large title data bases. The second network category consists of intermediate organizations such as CLASS, AMIGOS, or SOLINET, which provide regional outlets for these major utilities and also offer a variety of other services such as catalog production, union catalogs, and educational programming. The third category includes the local systems that provide the final link between national data bases and the users. These are usually, but not always, public systems of multi-county size such as the Houston Area Library System of the Cleveland Area Metropolitan Library System, and provide automated services as well as continuing education, collection development and other services.

This multi-library cooperation was developed in the mid- to late 1970's in spite of substantial barriers to such organization. These barriers include the clash of personalities, library leadership's indifference or ignorance of the results, and an unwillingness to experiment.[1] Add to this the desire of the librarian and board to keep full

local control, and one has the major obstacles that must be surmounted to create library systems. These forces contrary to cooperation are not eliminated when cooperative systems are created. Where public systems are successful there must be an ongoing dialogue that neutralizes these forces contrary to cooperation.

Where these forces are contained and cooperative systems organized, they have produced benefits such as extended access to information, improved delivery service, and increased productivity in cataloging and/or circulation that participating libraries can claim as their own when they go before their agencies for funds. The improved services are also viewed by the public as the library's own achievements since networks do not have visibility outside the library community.

After libraries have overcome the institutional barriers and committed themselves to a cooperative system, they must establish a workable governance structure for the system. This is a political problem of members developing a mechanism that will clearly provide goals and a management structure and establish the rights and legal liabilities of participants. It should set the standards by which network effectiveness can be measured.[2] It should also provide the leadership essential in establishing long-range goals, developing an effective program, and raising the necessary program funds. One of the cooperative's most important resources is the personality and political skill of the system director, who must find a format to balance benefits between the small libraries and the large ones that serve the greatest number of users and account for most system resources. In such circumstances, equal distribution of benefits is not necessarily equitable. Where system

governance permits the largest library to spend system funds largely on itself, the system is unstable and will often splinter into two separate systems, one serving the largest library and the other serving the small libraries. Unfortunately such splintering eliminates many of the benefits of cooperation.

The other extreme is a governance structure that is highly divided among a great number of libraries without providing clear management authority. In these circumstances long-range planning is often deficient. Funding priorities tend to vary widely from year to year without clear direction.

The road is not an easy one since system success depends on participants' political abilities to provide direction and an equitable distribution of system benefits. Member libraries of successful systems make substantial contributions through their initiative in identifying problems before they become divisive and in suggesting compromise solutions. Members of systems that have been successful in terms of growth and delivered services have demonstrated a willingness and ability to compromise and find trade-off solutions to their problems. Mutual trust and flexibility have characterized their relationship.

The optimum arrangement is a structure that supplies a leadership role for the largest institutions or establishes a separate and independent management authority while also providing a political check by a board of institutional members for system planning and budgeting. Advisory groups are an efficient intermediary means of providing the reaction of system members. Successful systems use many such groups organized around their various programs.

An aspect of governance that does not appear in any formal organization documents yet is a more important contributor to an organization's health than is often realized is the social structure between system members. John P. Kotter in Organization Dynamics describes this social system as a common culture consisting of the values shared by the members and the relationships of power, affiliation and trust existing between them. According to Kotter, studies indicate that the social system has profound effects on the behavior of the organization. Those familiar with library systems would agree. Where there is agreement in goals and trust between members a much higher level of cooperation can be achieved. Systems that have such trust can tolerate substantial setbacks without threat to the system. In contrast other cooperative systems that have fairly low levels of shared purpose and trust find themselves in serious controversy over minor matters. The formal governance structure can be identical between two such systems. Recognizing and building common values and trust among system members is an essential aspect of system development that has often been overlooked in practice.

What is the most useful organization structure for cooperative systems in the 1980's? The single most successful cooperative enterprise of the 1970's was the CCLC network which was organized as a non-profit corporation. Since the public library systems of the 1980's need to accomplish a broader set of objectives than building a data network and must obtain public finds to accomplish these objectives, the corporation model will not be adequate. In fact the legal basis for all of the systems visited except one was established by state law. None was a corporation. All the systems but one were governed by a board that

was either appointed by the governor or elected by the membership. In every case of appointed boards a group of advisory committees representing the network members had been established. In several cases there has been an effort made to expand the kinds of librarians formally appointed to governing boards. The non-profit corporation will continue to be a useful model for technical systems. The Washington Library Network is considering such a structure for its on-line cataloging system. The corporation can be more responsive to the library marketplace than a board representing a broad political base and should be used by cooperative systems for technical systems where marketing and good management are primary requirements.

The directors of library systems visited identified two operational tasks as their most critical ones: 1) informing members of system activity and providing them an ongoing role in shaping policy, and 2) explaining program costs and obtaining financial support. All said that communications was their most difficult and time-consuming task. They accomplished this in a variety of ways: 1) publishing monthly newsletters; 2) appointing members to represent special groups in the system such as university or special libraries and asking them for their opinions on issues or notifying them of events of particular interest; 3) appointing advisory committees on special topics; 4) holding regional meetings in various locations when critical issues had to be decided, thereby increasing the number that could participate; 5) holding semi-annual meetings of members to discuss and vote on policy issues; and 6) meeting with individual members. All of these approaches were reported helpful. Time spent by system staff in meeting with members

appeared to be most important in establishing the mutual trust upon which such cooperative enterprises are ultimately built.

Cooperative systems faced the usual kind of group problems in this communication process. Eric Berne indicated in his analysis of group behavior that individuals in a group tend to think of their own relationship with the leader as the central problem of the group.[3] Users tended to evaluate system services and interpret information in terms of the particular problems that they were experiencing. A substantial amount of the network director's time was required to handle the complaints of a relatively few vocal librarians. Although the complaints often were not related to policy issues, these librarians influenced a number of their peers and required an unusual amount of attention. Network directors indicated that they spent the balance of their time in personal interviews, meetings, and activities to resolve problems and promote services.

Cooperative systems provided the means through computer systems to substantially increase the productivity in libraries. Until recently even large libraries invested no more than a few hundred dollars per employee in capital equipment, providing little more than the essential typewriters. As the average capital investment by industry is over $25,000 per employee, it is not surprising that library productivity lagged well behind the national average. By use of the resources that system networks are providing, libraries are at last seeing increases in productivity. The cooperative system provides wide access to a computer facility representing a larger capital investment than libraries can separately afford.

Public libraries face the challenge of building these systems at the same time they are reassessing their role in the community and reorganizing their best services while competing for a shrinking public dollar. To their traditional responsibilities for providing educational materials and leisure reading they have added the tasks of providing information on community services and access to a larger range of knowledge through interlibrary networks. Given such demands on public libraries it is not surprising that some have been slow to accept network computer services for cataloging or circulation control. It is more surprising that such a large number are using the services. All computer-based services carry a price tag. Public libraries have always operated at a low funding level and are seeing their budgets further eroded by inflation and the Proposition 13 movement. They have criticized the computer networks which were heavily subsidized with federal funds for not providing less expensive services. The competition that is beginning to appear between bibliographic networks may give them some relief. Paying for such services is a new reality of library life but with rising labor costs, public libraries will find it increasingly necessary to use these.

What other changes in the public library's role can be expected in the next decade and what contributions can be anticipated of cooperative systems? The computer networks will provide libraries better access to the nation's single most valuable commodity: information, which today consumes over half of the country's resources. In the service- and information-oriented 1980's access to that data takes on more importance. The public library that gives its users access

to several million titles through data systems and interlibrary networks offers an entirely different level of services than one which provides access only to the ideas contained in the 50,000 to 100,000 volumes on its shelves.

Public libraries' tradition of entirely free services for books and periodicals has made many reluctant to charge a fee for data-based services. In fact such data services open a new universe of special report literature to the user that is otherwise lost. These services improve user access and are more precise than traditional subject searching. It is reasonable to charge a fee for such special services and leave the choice to the patrons. The information in the data bases will be lost to the user when a librarian makes the choice on the basis of tradition and a limited budget. Some libraries have found a middle ground in which they contract for a minimum amount of searching. They encourage their staff to use it as another reference tool and establish a charge for patrons who wish to use it. Most of the data services will be purchased through cooperative systems that can provide group rates and related training.

Into the Information Age, a recent study by Arthur D. Little, Inc., characterized our society as having moved into its third information era. The first one in the 19th century saw the founding of the public library. Information was organized in the scientific community by discipline, and in the library this was reflected in the Dewey Class System. The second era occurred during and after World War II. In the scientific community information was mission-oriented, e.g. to promote atomic or space research, and the public library in this

period developed special business collections to promote community business needs. The study indicated that the third information era, in the 1970's and after, emphasizes solving socio-technical problems and is problem-oriented, e.g. how to provide better housing or solve the energy problem. This approach is reflected in the problem-oriented information system developed by some public libraries in the form of the community resource files which include city-wide services of United Fund agencies, the Red Cross, and federal and state governmental agencies. These services are analyzed in subject indexes that help the librarian put the user in touch with the agency most likely to assist him. Public libraries in Detroit, Dallas, and Houston offer examples of this service.

The Little study points out that wide access to data has become essential to the management of problems and the shaping of public policy in a society heavily dependent on technology. However, with the exception of the community resource files, little has been done to create the data bases required for such problem-oriented data systems. According to the Little study, word processing, text storage and online systems will provide the technologies for these systems. However, the shrinking budget of libraries in real dollars make it unlikely that they can finance development of such systems. Nor is it likely that cooperative systems can provide funds for the basic research that should precede these new systems. Like the mission-oriented system, federal and corporate funds will have to develop the prototypes. Once developed, cooperative systems will provide an environment which could sustain them and make them available to the public.

The libraries share with offices generally the characteristic of being the single area that these on-line technologies offers the greatest potential for increased productivity. The reference station in libraries that now works in the mode of the reference librarian remaining with one patron until their inquiry is satisfied will have to change in the future to permit such increases in productivity. It may work somewhat along the following lines. The professional will be located at a reference station with an on-line terminal that will provide some or all of the following services: record of location and checkout status of all library holdings, commercial data bases that can be accessed as needed, subject access to library holdings, access to the holdings of nearby libraries. The reference professional would be assisted by trained non-professionals who would stay with a patron when necessary to find a particular item recommended by the reference librarian and determine if the inquiry was satisfied. Providing the reference librarian such a set of tools on the floor where the questions are asked offers the first possibilty for increased productivity in a number of years.

Another major task that cooperative systems must assist libraries with in the 1980's is developing the use of media to tell their story to the public. Changing housing patterns and large apartment complexes have taken their toll of a sense of neighborhood and knowledge about community institutions like the public library. Our society depends now on its early morning paper and evening television to know its own community as well as the world. Libraries need to recognize the critical roles that the media play in educating the community to the use of the library and in creating its public image. A 1973 study of the information needs of urban residents indicated that only three per cent turned to the library for information on their most important problems.[4] This public perception prevails even when substantial amounts of data in the form of books, government studies, and access to data bases are actually available in libraries. The absence of adequate funding for advertising and promotion account for this. Academic libraries do not advertise and public libraries have been slow to incorporate into their traditions this need to sell their information product. Even those who have experimented with media and found an impressive public response find it difficult to fund substantial advertising. Cooperative systems can make a major contribution in this area helping libraries to market their services.

Conclusion

Cooperative systems are libraries' best means of competing in a society that is dominated by large organizations by providing a mechanism for raising the funds necessary for adequate library

services. Faced with increasing labor costs and demands for information that already exceed the resources of a local collection, libraries must in the 1980's make greater use of computer networks and data systems that they can only jointly fund.

The most difficult aspect of developing multi-library systems is the recognition by administrators and board members that they can be built only at the expense of some local autonomy. Compromises must be made in policies affecting cataloging, circulation, audio-visual and other shared services to take full advantage of the increases in productivity that can be achieved through shared systems. Librarians must build governance structures that encourage a reasonable balance of services between different-sized libraries and promote common goals and mutual trust. Where cooperative systems remain anemic because of a lack of trust or uncertain funding they pose no threat to local library control and offer no long-term assistance to service. The political process of forging bonds between libraries begun in the 1960's must accelerate in the 1980's.

Since data bases listing local social services are a demonstrated need in larger communities, a MARC-like standard for the data should be developed along with packaged software that would allow libraries to make this problem-oriented information system more widely available at lower cost. Federal investment in information system research should be encouraged and public libraries should be alert to the results.

The more powerful role of media in shaping the public understanding of libraries must be understood and substantial promotional programs be financed by cooperative systems. Such use of media will

increase the use of the library as well as lay an excellent basis for political support.

If library services are to improve, the nature of the service must change significantly from one that is locally based but supplemented with cooperative services to a service that rests equally on cooperative system services and local services. Only through these large organizations can libraries fund the advanced technology that is essential to their information responsibilities in the 1980's. If directors continue to insist upon the automony of their institutions and their libraries are not brought into large systems, their usefulness and funding will decline in the next decade.

The greatest responsibility rests upon library directors and board members across the country who must recognize the need for different, cost-effective, organizational patterns and must work to establish a balance between decreased automony and increased productivity and effectiveness. This leadership and political wisdom in fashioning and maintaining cooperative systems in spite of the institutional pressures they experience will be the decisive factor in improving library services in the 1980's.

Finally, as these systems are developed, it is essential that they be judged by the answer to the question: Do they provide better service to the user than is otherwise available?

[1]Montgomery K. Leon, "The Governance of Library Networks" in the Structure and Governance of Library Networks. 1979 p.189

[2]Charles H. Stevens "Governance of Library Networks" Library Trends, Fall, 1977 p. 222

[3]Eric Berne The Structure and Dynamics of Organizations and Groups 1966 p63

[4]E. S. Walner Information needs of Urban Residents. Office of Education, U.S. Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare. 1973